Reclaiming Natural Order: Wandering, Transience, and the Native American Medicine Wheel

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Abstract

Across the expanse of socio-cultural landscapes, the concept of domesticity has set standards and created ideologies in heavy correspondence with Western colonialism. The foundational backdrop of America presents an intricate opportunity to examine collective perceptions of the foreign and domestic spheres. For all that is said about the country's distinct identity, nothing in America is original. Plants, animals, cuisine, religion, tradition—all have come from afar and been made anew by domestication. And for all that is taken, much is also lost. Through this understanding an idea emerges that mankind's (and, in many contexts, America's) unrelenting greed for power and control is continuously met with some foreign force of nature that serves as a reminder that the foreign and the domestic cannot be separated. Thus, is the concept of domesticity a paradox? Tommy Orange's *Wandering Stars* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* explore very introspective views of the relationship between foreign and domestic, the first through the lens of Native American assimilation and the second through the 1950s domestic household. In this essay, I seek to expel the notion of isolation between the foreign and domestic spheres through the exploration and analysis of wandering and transience within these two novels, and push for the presence of a larger sphere of natural order that better embodies the fluidity of these areas of interest. I will affirm these ideas by example of the sacred Native American Medicine Wheel and a case study of domestic manifestations in popular culture.

Keywords: domesticity, domestic, foreign, natural order, wandering, transience, Medicine Wheel

Defining Domesticity

Because domesticity is a prevalent topic in various social and cultural contexts, I will provide the contexts in which this essay will address and reformulate the perception of domestic/foreign spaces. Under authority of Civil War soldier Richard Henry Pratt, the early

indigenous communities of America faced forced assimilation in boarding schools, which sought to erase cultural identity and spiritual beliefs that were deemed immoral and which more closely resembled beasts than humans. It is with this beastly, wild nature that I argue on behalf of indigenous peoples' deep-rooted connection to the earth and environment (the foreign), a connection notably combated by colonialism's domestic propriety and purity through traditional Christian values.

In a similar manner the domestic household of the 1950s becomes a prominent example of acceptable American lifestyle, dutifully enforcing gender roles and social expectations for behavior, aesthetics, and inclusivity. The cyclic nature of seasons and weather in Robinson's *Housekeeping* establishes transience as a bridge between the foreign and domestic spheres, perhaps positioning nature as a higher power that restores and allows the narrative's characters to navigate a more interconnected environment. It is with this contextualization of Native American culture and contemporary social expectations that the ideas of wandering and transience will begin to invoke a broader sphere of natural order.

***Wandering Stars* & Native American Spirituality**

Tommy Orange's novel *Wandering Stars* traverses a painstaking account of generational trauma and cultural turmoil within a Native American family line, beginning briefly with Jude Star and ending with one of the youngest of the generation, Lony Red Feather. Each of the characters along this family line face the effects and shadows of what came before them, and things that continue to manifest today, decades after the boarding schools and assimilation. These boarding schools resulted in the degradation and deaths of countless Native Americans, many remaining undocumented, and sowed the seeds of generations of trauma still present to this day.

Throughout the novel, we see characters like Charles Star, who is unable to escape the past of the father he never knew (Jude) because he was killed by the workings of Pratt. We see Opal Viola Bear Shield narrating a letter to her daughter, Victoria, explaining the significance of her name in Indian culture and telling her that the presence of Indians today is a miracle. We see young Orvil Red Feather, who is shot at a Native American gathering while rain dancing. He and his friend Sean struggle with drug addiction. Brothers Orvil, Loother, and Lony are presented as the youngest generation of the novel's timeline, and even then, they continue to face the effects of domestication, which rendered their culture and identity invisible and left them with the responsibility of carrying it on despite never knowing it fully.

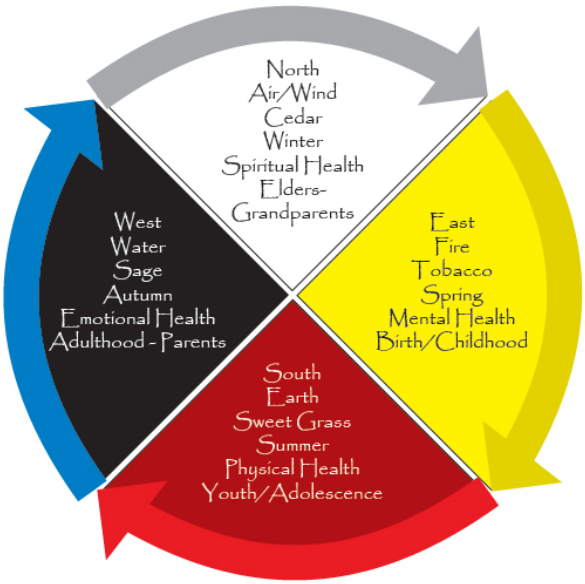
Lony Red Feather in particular, partakes in a curious portrayal of the domestic and foreign spheres through the concept of wandering, the novel's namesake. By the end of the novel, Lony has disappeared and isolated himself from his family in his search of a personal understanding of the weight he bears to uphold the legacy of an identity he never got to embrace completely. The last chapter of the novel is a letter from Lony to his family, accounting his journey in the California wilderness. "I lived like Indians back when our world ended that first time. To be free and wandering and figuring it out because it all got so disfigured…I really thought I was living like an Indian," he wrote (Orange, pp. 312). Lony's wandering brought him to a semblance of enlightenment towards his Indian identity, while also noting how his time away made him realize he had a home to go back to.

In traditional Lakota practice, there is a rite of passage called *Hanblecheyapi,* or a vision quest, in which a teenage Indian ventures into the wilderness alone seeking personal growth and spiritual guidance— "a vision which grants profound meaning and direction…" (Lomakayu). With this understanding, Lony's return to the wild, the foreign, allowed him to embody this

coming-of-age spiritual practice and reimagine his place in the domestic and foreign spheres, not as a separate and isolating process, but a cycle of wandering that all souls must experience for themselves in order to truly see the interconnectedness of all things.

The Native American Medicine Wheel

The Native American Medicine Wheel is another fundamental symbol and teaching tool that exhibits the cyclic, impermanent state of life. Also known as the Sacred Hoop, generations of various Native American tribes have used this symbol to examine dimensions of health and healing within these cycles of life.



Petro, Patricia. Native American Symbolic Circles. (Photo). *Inspiration for the Spirit*. https://www.inspirationforthespirit.com/native-american-symbolic-circles/

The wheel depicts Four Directions, each representative of a different plane of existence with notable nuance to stages of life, seasons of the year, ceremonial plants and animals, and elements of nature. All of these things influence aspects of life: spiritual, emotional, intellectual,

and physical (National Library of Medicine). The spiritual blog post *Inspiration for the Spirit* observes the following original words from Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux and cited from the novel *Returning Home* by Aaron Paquette:

> *"Everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the power of the world always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation; and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished."* (Petro)

In lieu of the discussion of domestic and foreign spheres, the Medicine Wheel presents an alternative perception of existential spaces, procuring a broad and connective state of being interwoven with all elements of life. The dominant and controlling ideology of Western domestication is undone by the power that is imparted by the Sacred Hoop, in which the attempt to isolate and chip away at a culture or nation's identity only serves to fracture the solidarity of all people and the environment in which we thrive, depriving us of the natural order. The Medicine Wheel can then be perceived as a higher reclamation of said natural order, manifesting itself in both *Wandering Stars* and *Housekeeping*.

The cycles of life, death, and rebirth are prevalent in the narrative of Orange's fictional Native American family tree, particularly with the Aftermath section of the novel in which the youngest generation is burdened by unbearable truths of their broken legacy and identity. On the other hand, their youth and fire in the face of adversity suggests an opportunity for rebirth, for restoring the hoop that was broken by assimilation. This is compounded by Lony's vision quest in the last chapter when he experiences a spiritual "return home" (Orange, pp. 314). Although *Housekeeping* creates an entirely different narrative of domestication, characters Sylvie and Ruth explore the concept of transience in a manner of correspondence with the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. The idea of being in one place for a fleeting amount of time is reflective of the

natural changing state of the earth, again suggesting that the domestic and foreign spheres are a part of a much larger circle of order. Sylvie's quirky behavior and unconventional household teaches Ruth to see the structures of society in a more open-minded way, a way in which she doesn't have to conform to gender roles or social expectations set by the standard 1950s domestic household. Thus, transience allows Ruth to discover what it means to be a part of both the domestic and the foreign. This is also mirrored by the changing of seasons and weather cycles throughout the novel, as well as the role of the natural environment impacting domestic life. The lake of Fingerbone becomes a reminder that nature has the capacity to take life (like the life of Ruth's mother), and to give life, as it did by aiding Sylvie and Ruth in their attempt to leave town without a trace and start anew outside of the domestic society they were confined to before.

"Colors of the Wind"

The ideas of wandering, transience, and domesticity become an intriguing topic of discussion in popular culture. In consideration of cultural assimilation, the song "Colors of the Wind" from Disney's *Pocahontas* is a sound example of the Medicine Wheel's evocation of a natural order that is drastically different from the Western construct of foreign and domestic spheres. It is a pop ballad which conveys messages about respecting nature and animism, and the song's themes have been exhibited in New Age spirituality and transcendentalist literature. Even more so, the lyrics ask its audience to deeply examine their understanding of separateness between race and species, attempting to dissolve pre-established notions of dominance and superiority and reveal the inclusive, harmonic balance that abounds Native American culture.

You think you own whatever land you land on
The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim
But I know ev'ry rock and tree and creature
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name

You think the only people who are people
Are the people who look and think like you
But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger
You'll learn things you never knew you never knew

The song begins by immediately addressing the wrongdoings and misconceptions wrought upon by American colonialism and assimilation, creating an outlet for thoughts on white supremacy, racism, and capitalism. Yet, the song does not necessarily point fingers or make accusations, but rather invites the audience to see life through the eyes of an Indian and through the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. The renowned chorus asks enlightening questions like "Have you ever heard the wolf cry to the blue corn moon?" and "Can you sing with all the voices of the mountain?" that paints a vivid picture of a relationship with nature that isn't forged by human greed (Menken).

You can own the Earth and still
All you'll own is Earth until
You can paint with all colors of the wind

The final verses of the song leave us with the provocative suggestion that continuing down such a path of greed will only leave us empty and wanting more, wanting something unattainable in a socio-cultural landscape so divided by everything that makes us human and one. In the end, "Colors of the Wind" is a beautiful ode to Native American spirituality and culture, and it speaks to the power of wandering and curiosity in shaping new perspectives.

Manifestations of Domesticity in Social Landscapes: Freckled Zelda on AGT

Rachael Wilson is an American social media influencer and musical artist who goes by the name Freckled Zelda. She is well distinguished for her enchanting folkloric presentation as a music fairy. Freckled Zelda made an appearance on *America's Got Talent* with a captivating rendition of "Colors of the Wind," and earned some exemplary comments from the judges in terms of her persona. The following video is a profound representation of domestic ideologies manifesting in pop culture:

Reynolds, C. [Cary Reynolds]. (2022, July 26). Freckled Zelda-colors of the wind-best audio-america's got talent-july 26, 2022 [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/CSc90nDvN8A?si=XsdKmEVJ0Fr-ojCT

Freckled Zelda skips onto the stage ecstatically and is met with the confused and judgmental gazes of both the judges and the audience. This doesn't seem to faze her as she happily introduces herself as a music fairy. She then asks Simon Cowell if he recognizes the instrument around her neck (an ocarina), to which he bluntly replies, "Never heard of it"

(Reynolds). The ocarina is a sweet-potato shaped flute that dates back to the Mayan and Aztec peoples and is similar in sound to the Native American flute. When Freckled Zelda gives them a brief background on this, Simon says, “Well, you’re interesting. Good luck” (Reynolds).

Ocarina [Photo]. (2024, December 9). In Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ocarina

Nonetheless, Freckled Zelda gives them a beautiful performance of “Colors of the Wind” with both flute and voice, earning her a standing ovation from the audience and judges. All of the judges agreed that her voice was amazing, with Simon claiming that he was pleasantly surprised. He left Freckled Zelda with this message: “You know, I don’t like the instrument; don’t think it’s necessary. Carry on looking like that if you want, because you’re interesting.” Sophia Vergara then asks her if she always wants to perform as Freckled Zelda, to which she responds “Yes, I’m 100% a fairy,” and that she is never going to change (Reynolds).

Freckled Zelda proves to be a unique examination of social, aesthetic, and behavioral expectations. Her bubbly, free-spirited personality and elvish aesthetic caused her audience to make immediate judgments about her before she even performed. Her use of the ancient ocarina and whimsical identification with being a fairy put her performance in an unconventional, maybe even uncomfortable light, but this is arguably what made it valuable and entertaining. Simon’s insistence that she doesn’t need the instrument or the quirky persona aligns with rigid Western standards for what is deemed appropriate for art and entertainment and puts into question

whether he truly listened to the words of the song at all. It is uncertain whether the judges' opinions of Freckled Zelda were wholly changed by the end, but it is refreshing and hopeful that such out of the ordinary experiences continue to emerge even in pop culture as a reminder that strange, wild things can be just that and still be well-received.

Conclusion

Is domesticity a paradox? The concepts of wandering and transience in tandem with Native American teaching suggests that the process of domestication is continuously undone by a natural order that never ceases to reclaim and reveal the interconnectedness of all things. The Western construct of foreign and domestic spheres becomes disillusioned in the face of a greater plane of existence similar to the symbolic Native American Medicine Wheel, which embodies an alternative vision of harmony and balance unburdened by separateness. *Wandering Stars* and *Housekeeping* utilize wandering and transience as a push to reimagine socio-cultural landscapes and emerge from the domestic constraints that isolate us from each other and the natural world. Only then might there be a return to something greater.

"I want to come home. That I even have one took me a long time being away to know. Maybe that's what we're all doing here. Alive long enough to get that when we die its home we're going back to, and that we came here to know that when we die it isn't an end but a return." -Tommy Orange, Wandering Stars

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